

“AN INTRODUCTION” AND “THE OLD PLAYHOUSE”: KAMALA DAS’

NEW TRIALS OF EMANCIPATION FOR INDIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on Kamala Das’ uncanny honesty of exploring womanhood in a patriarchal world. It presents “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse” as Das’ weapons of raising her vigorous voice and fighting against the male ego as well as the orthodox, conservative society. Considering Kamala Das as an ardent spokesperson for women’s freedom this paper examines her poems “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse” as the echoes of the pitiable condition of women and movements of emancipating the Indian women. This paper looks at the inner-meanings of these poems in the light of Das’ personal experience in order to argue that these poems have contributions in uplifting the deplorable condition of Indian women in a society where they can enjoy freedom without any restrictions. The findings reveal kamala Das as the poet who universalizes her personal issues to stimulate Indian women to establish their own individuality going beyond the shadows of patriarchal hegemony and substantiate Das’ poems “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse” as new trials of emancipation for Indian women.

KEYWORDS: Kamala Das, Emancipation, Womanhood, Spokesperson, Pitiable & Patriarchal

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INTRODUCTION

This study starts with a brief discussion of Feminism which is followed by a close analysis of Kamala Das as an Indian woman and poet raising her voice against the hegemony of man over woman which ultimately unfolds her poems “An Introduction” as an attempt to give voice to the voiceless Indian Women and “The Old Playhouse” as an attack on the patriarchal set-up.

FEMINISM AND KAMALA DAS

Feminism is a movement of raising voice against the male-dominated society and of emancipating women from their pitiable condition. In the broader sense, it is an attempt to define womanhood and establish their rights in the patriarchal society. Gender equality is at the core of feminist movement which maps women’s rights on the fact of sexes in all sectors of life. Feminism isn’t something about hating men. But it is all about challenging the gender inequalities. Peter Barry thinks, “The ‘Women’s Movement’ of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which have diagnosed the problem of women’s inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions.” (Barry, 2017) Actually, the term ‘feminism’ is difficult to define. Here we can quote the ideas of Mary Eagleton:

“Unsurprisingly, the millennium produced many feminists ‘state of the discourse’ addressed at conferences, in monographs, articles and special issues of journals. All trace a history, usually post-1968 and most recognize the force of two powerful emotions: a nostalgia for a past Golden Age of feminist collectivity and

purpose, though such a period is invoked only to be immediately disputed, and a deep longing for a utopian future, though here too there are qualifications; the vision is rhetorical, a spur to action rather than a blueprint for any lived political reality. Weighing up the gains and losses, what has been done and what still needs to be done, is a complex process, all the more so because one is often trying to work between a political philosophy and practice, changes in the 'common culture' and the specific impact that feminism has had in the academy and on knowledge production." (Eagleton, 2008)

For Toril Moi feminism, from the political position, can be seen as 'femaleness' which is a matter of biology and as 'femininity' which is a set of culturally defined characteristic. (Moi, 1989) "Feminist literature highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women—the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender" (Kumar, 1998) Some feminist writers have struggled to be acknowledged in the intelligentsia while some other revolted against the patriarchal society. The speech of Virginia Woolf can be taken as an example of the revolutionary spirit of the feminist writers where she says that no one can put any gate, lock, and bolt upon the freedom of her mind. (Woolf, 2005) Dr. M. K. Bhatnagar in his "Feminist English Literature-An Introduction" says, "Feminism in the Indian context is a by-product of the western liberalism in general and feminist thought in particular." (Bhatnagar, 1999) But Kamala Das belonged to those feminist writers who have maintained a balance. She is both feminine and feminist at the same time who in her poetry depicts a plea for the realization and compassion of the patriarchal counterpart. She is a feminist dazzling a new trial of emancipation for Indian women.

In the answer of Eunice de Souza's question, regarding Kamala Das' own consideration of herself as a feminist, she says that in spite of others thinking her as a feminist she considers herself as a feminist creature who loves the accompany of both men and women. (De Souza, 1999)

Kamala Das' poetry portrays, highlights and condemns the inequalities in the handling of women, the injustices and disadvantages women have to face on account of their gender. Her poems are marked for the feminine sensibility. A traditional and conservative outlook of the society made her a victim and she suffered a lot even in her life of sex with her husband. She, in her poems, writes on her particular experience which can be taken as a universal token as the female readers will have the ability to get identified with her. She openly exposes the feminist concern in her poetry. According to Sunanda p. Chavan "Kamala Das is the embodiment of the most significant stage of development of Indian feminine poetic sensibility that has not been reached by any of her contemporary's yet." (Chavan, 1984)

Kamala Das, also known as Madhavi Kutti, is one of the well-known Indian English poets of 20th century. She is best known for her protests against patriarchy. D. R. Konnur thinks that Kamala Das' impulse for identity and liberation finds its complete exposure in the infliction of her poetic self over the domestic self which led her to lead a monotonous and subjugate role of a traditional wife. (Konnur, 2011) Kamala Das never tries to follow the existing tradition blindly and never takes any attempt to change and develop the existing Indian literary tradition. But her single-handed contribution gifts a strong maturity and magnitude for which a distinctive literary tradition emerges after her. Thus, she emerged as one of the signified writers with a deep understanding and insight on the various panoramas of Indian society. In her poetry, she depicts the feminist approach very openly. Her poetry is her attempt to establish her feminine identity as well as her personal identity. Her poetry is the outcome of all her dissatisfaction and psychological traumas. Her poetry is an expression of her feminine sensibility which in short can be termed as the poetry of revolt. Here, the observation of K. R. Srinivas Iyenger can be quoted where he says, "Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglican poetry, a far poetic cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das has fiercely feminine

sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive man-made world.” (Srinivas, 1962)

Kamala Das was never exhausted from speaking loudly for the liberation from the clutches of the male-dominated society. As she complains: “They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us - I felt myself to be an intruder in any room rather than mine-every morning I told myself from the desolation of my life and escape, escape into another life and into another country.”(Kamala, 1988)

The matriarchal bondage was quite suffocating for the poet as she was screwed by male chauvinism as well as by the society. In the male-dominated society male perspective stands for the social perspective which has a far-reaching impact on the deconstruction of social values. In spite of all the worldly obstacles, Kamala Das writes about what her mind says. In a very simple and candid language, she depicts the mind-set of the society and exposes the male domination of the day. Her poems are the revelations of her unhappy, dissatisfied life. In her poems, she throws light on the patriarchal prejudices and discriminations. So, feminist imageries are found in her poetry which focuses on the criticism of marriage, motherhood, women’s bodies and their control over sexuality, women’s role in the traditional Indian male-dominated society.

“AN INTRODUCTION” AS AN ATTEMPT TO GIVE VOICE TO THE VOICELESS INDIAN WOMEN

“An Introduction” is a poem of an introduction of Kamala. It seems that she herself is getting introduced to the readers as well as to the society. It is an autobiographical poem where Kamala Das throws light on the living picture of a woman’s life living in a patriarchal society. The deep reading of this poem brings about the idea of the division of this poem into four parts. The comprehensive analysis of each part shows that this poem is nothing but the inner feelings of a female as well as the expression of her understandings encompass of suffering in a miserable wedding at the male dominance. For this, she is called “‘every woman who seeks love’; she is ‘the beloved and the betrayed’, expressing her ‘endless female hunger,’ ‘the mutual whisper at the core of womanhood.’”(Naik, 2006)

“An Introduction” can be divided into women and politics and as Individuals, poetic persona’s struggle to establish her independence, poetic persona’s miserable conjugal life, and her struggle to establish her own identity as well as the status ‘I’.

The first part presents women’s condition in a political society which is very miserable as well as marginalized and women’s individuality. The first three sentences are about women and politics. The tone is here quite ambiguous. Apparently, these lines depict a female’s confession of ignorance but in deeper, it is an exposition of an irony where the society is unwilling to see a women’s involvement in politics but has only the knowledge of names of those in power which has no impact on her life. Rather, we find her as a victim of politics. In other sense by challenging us that she can repeat the names of politicians as easily of the week, or the names of months she reminds us that these politicians were in power in a repetitive cycle of time, irrespective of any kind of individuality. It seems to her that they did not define time: rather defined by time.

The other sentences of the second part are about women’s individuality:

“I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar

I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one.”

To establish women's individuality here the poet talks about her own life experience. She focuses on the nationality that is Indian rather than saying that she belongs to Malabar which indicates that she is far from regional prejudices, the complexion that is of brown and the birthplace that is in Malabar. This part can be seen having a note of protest and resentment at the lustful exploitation of woman. Writing in two languages, she candidly exposed her personal experience. Having a very unhappy and dissatisfied life, she felt herself as being treated as the 'Other' by the patriarchal society and this feeling compelled her to rebel and to give a voice to her pent-up emotions. For her involvement in such kind of writings, A. N. Dwivedi remarks her as a typical confessional poet pouring her heart into poetry, letting us peep into her sorrow, suffering and tortured psyche, which makes her largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured. (Dwivedi, Das, & Poetry)

In this part of the poem may be the poetic persona is trying to show her educational qualification which is not very common among the women. She says about her speaking ability in three languages and her writing ability in two. Maybe this is her attempt to prove that she is no lesser than any man in the world. She is having all the qualities and abilities that make her equivalent to a man. Though she is a woman, she has the ability, thinking power, passion, emotion, and creativity like a man. It is only in her dream that she is an individual as the man is which she wants to materialize in this earthly world.

The second part is all about the poetic persona's struggle to establish her independence. Here, she presents essential every woman, their hopes, despair giving voice to the universally voiceless women.

“... why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? why not let me speak in

Any language I like? ”

Here, her voice is full of feminist consciousness asking the critics, friends, cousins to let her use the language which she wants and asking them how a language can be owned by a particular community. As it belongs to that person who uses it, she should not be stopped from using it. She is speaking in such a way that she is conscious of her own right to use it with her own choice, joys, and longing. Thus, she is against the exploitation of anything. She hates the control of any autonomy. She belongs to those feminists who made a strong appearance and broke free from the rhetorical and romantic convention of writing poetry to establish her individuality as well as to exercise her freedom. That sense of freedom gives her voice to rebel against the patriarchal mindset of the Indian society and to show her ownership of the English language:

“The Language I speak,

Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses

All mine, mine alone.”

Kamala Das wants the liberty of using the language. Her revolt as a woman against the patriarchy is similar to her protest as a poet against the use of mother tongue for poetry. She has a choice of using English as the poetic medium.

So, it is really difficult to make a distinction between Kamala, the poet from Kamala, the woman. Here we can quote the speech of King Bruce, “Writing is a means of creating a place in the world, the use of the personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion” (King, 1987)

She is protesting against the oppression of the male and the consequent negligence of the female as if Draupadi in The Mahabharata is protesting against the sons of Dhritarashtra and blaming her husbands for being silent when Dussasana sprang on her, seized her by the hair and dragged her along to the assembly hall. The femininity of Adichie is also noticeable on KamalaDas’ spirit. Adichie says that she does not want to be apologetic for her femininity and she wants to be respected in all her femaleness. (Adichie, 2014) This spirit is very much vivid in this poem where Kamala Das is trying to introduce her own femininity.

The third part begins with her physical description and later moves on to her married life. She criticized the social trend from her own experience where the young girls are forced to marry old men without having their consent and is drawn to the bed and made to tolerate the pains of sex that she is not willing to do. This part depicts how the loveless sexual relation in the name of marriage becomes tormenting for the innocent girl only because of her womanliness.

“When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door.

He did not beat

But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.”

More specifically ‘sad woman-body felt so beaten’ indicates her unfulfilled sexual desires. In one sense Kamala Das is a politician doing the politics of language in her poetry. As she is a beloved as well as betrayed one she puts the blame on her husband. Actually, Kamala is sexual and bodily; crazy after making sex. She is blaming her husband for her unfulfilled desire. She can be compared to the Clara Dawes of *Son’s and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence. Kamala seems to be Clara but not Clara she is Kamala from Malabar. Like Clara, she has not risen from the level of body and submerged in lust, infatuation, and erotic love. She is always conscious of the distinction between love and lust. For Marks and de Courtivron, “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetoric, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse.” (Courtivron & Marks, 1980) Like this, for Kamala Das, the body is the soul of her writings and her use of moods, tone, and diction help her break the patriarchal chain as well as social control over her. To quote Dr. V. Alexander Raju, “In the poems of Kamala Das, we find a rare body and its feelings and she seems incapable of thinking of eternal life as a bodiless existence. This peculiar stance may be the reason why she is drawn to Islamic religion with its different concept of life after life.” (Raju, 2001) In this sense this poem is really a polyphonic creation of the poet’s revolutionary voice which is immortalized here as it seeks one kind of articulation in a single verbal construct:

“Dress in saree, be a girl

Be wife, they said...

... Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when

Jilted in love..."

Though in this part, the focus is on her married life and she refers to her husband and in-laws, but here her husband and her in-laws can be seen as social perspective. Here 'They' is used to refer to this social perspective. Keeping this in mind we can have two sides to this part. One is the personal while the other for a greater cause. The former one leads to the success of the later one which is a study in rebellion, protest, and anger directed against predicament. For this K. Satchidanandan says, "The woman can't change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men. But the voices of the tradition would force her back into sarees, the saree becoming here a sign of convention. She is pushed back into her expected gender roles: wife, cook, embroiderer quarreler with servants: the gender role also becomes a class role." (Satchidanandan, 1996) But she tries to establish her individuality by violating the social norms and tries to emancipate women from their doll-like lives which are imposed upon them. This part is a vehement protest against the restrictions which limit the existence of woman within the home as well as the patriarchal set-up.

The last part is about her struggle for the establishment of the status of 'I'.

"I met a man, loved him. Call

Him not by any name, he is every man

Who wants a woman just as a I am every

Woman who seeks love..."

Here, 'A man' is the everyman who desires a woman to satisfy his sexual desire. His identity is that he is 'I'. She asks who you are, she asks it to everyone. But the answer is 'I'. For her that 'I' is 'you', 'you', 'I'. This 'I' is the male-ego which gives him the freedom of choice and action. In order to have that freedom, she tries to attribute the title of 'I' to herself. Like men, she attributes herself as the sinner and saint, beloved and betrayed. She is in no way different from those of men. Thus, she emancipates herself to the status of 'I'. Because for her, though the trend is different, all the paths lead the same destination.

"I am a sinner,

... I too call myself I."

Thus, this poem is her struggle against 'The categorizers' to whom she defines and asserts her identity to conquer and dominate. For this, Om Prakash Grewal says, "Kamala Das' Poetry has a special force and appeal for us primarily because of the honesty and candor with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual with a distinctive identity and to be her authentic self even if this involves breaking the moulds of traditional ethics and property." (Grewal, 1979)

She attempts to up thrust the prestige of women by resisting the dominance of men. Even the concluding lines of this poem remind us of the view of Virginia Woolf that women should act as a class regardless of class, race and social position. So, she is known as a social rebel and as a social rebel, her poems expose her desire for breaking the one-sided routine of domesticity. She, as a social rebel and feminist, revolts against the social perspective that takes the decision and women have to follow it silently ignoring their own power as well as identity.

“THE OLD PLAYHOUSE” AS AN ATTACK ON THE PATRIARCHAL SET-UP

In “The Old Playhouse” Kamala Das brings out her total disenchantment with her married life. This poem is an open protest against the male-ego of her husband who never goes beyond her own sexual satisfaction. The title suggests that the speaker who is a female persona discovers that her husband’s love-making has made up her mind an old playhouse putting out all its lights and childish innocence. This old playhouse is an abandoned as well as desert-like playhouse having no life of its own due to the disastrous physical-cum-mental strains. This playhouse reminds us of the traditional gender roles and the hegemony of man over woman. In a broader sense, this playhouse stands for the society as a whole. It can be the poet’s mind in which floating sensations, thoughts, and memories are the actors acting their role in the darkness. The female persona after being confined and suffocated accuses her husband of treating her like a swallow in a well – planned manner. The suffering of a married woman, chained to her husband’s house is well exposed in the opening lines:

“You planned to tame a swallow to hold her.”

Here, the poetic persona’s suppressive marriage life is emphasized with the image of the swallow. This image is the symbol of both the beauty of the woman and her free spirit. The poem throws light on the disastrous fate of the speaker’s marriage. It is an excellent example of putting the marriage under a microscope through poetic interpretations. Marriage is neither just the fulfillment of sensual desires nor a unilateral relationship but a bilateral one based on mutual trust and understanding. The poem describes the contemplations of a trapped woman who is dominated, confined, doomed and enforced patriarchy after her marriage. This poem makes the speech of Kamala Das acceptable where she says that her writing not only exposes herself but throws light on the sins committed against the woman, and the silence inflicted on them. (Das & Bhan, 1990)

So, her poetry is both confessional and autobiographical and universalizes what is personal. Her poem “The Old Playhouse” is an attempt to explore the culture of true love. It is an attack on the social exploitation of female by the male for the gratification of his sensual appetites. It is a protest against the concept of reducing a woman to a just ‘wife’; a person devoid of any kind of identity, freedom, and individuality as well as without having any meaning of existence. The patriarchal set-up has made the male ego, more egoistic, dominating, monstrous and oppressive exercising its evil and monstrous power to reduce the female to a helpless persona:

“... cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf.”

This poem charts the relationship between masculine and feminine world using the rich and natural metaphor. The female-persona is compared to a ‘Swallow’ who has an ‘urge to fly.’ As she is tied and trapped in the name of marriage she has forgotten that ‘urge to fly’:

“Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but

Also her nature, the urge to fly and the endless

Pathways of the sky.”

This idea expresses her own urgency to go above all of her miseries with her own thoughts and her desire to instill in us the intensity of her feelings. This 'urge to fly' reminds us of John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" where he shows his urge to go beyond the sufferings of this world to join the Nightingale. It also reminds us George Herbert's "Easter Wings" where the speaker seeks power from God because of his urge to rise from his fallen situation.

Even the sounds and words of the poem "The Old Playhouse" creates a bitter attitude towards the male perspective. Because it is Kamala Das' expression of her inner pangs caused by marriage. The split between husband and wife as well as between man and woman becomes very vivid through the repetition of "You" and "I". Even, words with negative denotative and connotative meaning are found within the poem, describing the wife's suffocation and confinement; for example, 'monstrous', 'pall', 'haunted' and 'lonely'.

An atmosphere of the gratification of male persona's appetite is created by the use of rich physical images like 'shallow/convulsions', 'dribbled spittle', 'body's response' and 'bitter-sweet juices.' For Anisur Rahman, Kamala Das' greatness of poetry lies in her use of imagery. (Rahman, 1981) These images not only expose the male lust but also expose the female persona's distaste for it and her unwillingness to be subjected to the ennui of sensual hunger. Male supremacy is the central power of the society where the female psyche is only a dumb animal that is being forfeiture on the altar of the lust. This idea is very much clear when she writes:

"... There is

No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old

Playhouse with all its lights put out."

It seems that the playhouse has lost all its meaning and charm. Thus, she writes on her own life and universalizes it allowing the readers the ability to identify with her. She is very conscious of the male nature and so, she has no good word for the male. She alludes to Greek mythology to refer her husband to Narcissus and the wife to the nymph Echo.

"For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted

By its own lonely face..."

Narcissus is known to have rejected Echo's love and fallen in love with his own appearance in the water, at which he stares to death. Narcissus and Echo can be seen as the husband and wife of "The old playhouse". Das uses this to describe the male - ego's love for his egoism and the female persona's deprivation from true love. So, here Feroza Jussawalla's remarks should be quoted, "The subject of Kamala Das' poetry is solely that of the struggle to find the self beyond the physical and thus find the freedom to create." (Jussawalla, 1982) At the end we find her seeking a total sublime, spiritual experience, and freedom with such purity not to die as an individual but not to remain an old playhouse with all its lights put out. This ending is similar to the ending of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* where Nora slams the door behind her and leaves her husband Torvald and the children not to commit suicide but to find herself. It seems that like Nora she is also giving a trumpet-call to women to rise and give a voice for their right. Thus, Kamala Das' poetry introduces a new idiom, standard, and way of expression which opens a new era for women poets, where there will be the denial of the traditional form of poetic expression of the patriarchal culture. She finds one kind of pleasure in moving away from the conventional norms of the male-dominated society. For this Harish, Ranjana says, "She tries to return to her culturally defined self and then discards it realizing that it is not meant for her, that she can't live her life in accordance with the

cultural prescription."(Harish, 1995)

CONCLUSIONS

Kamala Das, the poetic persona of the above-mentioned poems, conveys women's plights and their struggles by using a profoundly restless spirit that is nourished in a mind that visualizes and hears and is aware of a disharmonious life, of the plight inflicted by the oppression, domestication and coercive subjugation. Things that come from her is something new. Before her, no woman poet has ever written about her innermost feelings with such power and honesty. For this Keki N. Daruwalla says that Kamala Das has shown the way to the other Indian women poets. (Daruwalla, 1980) In "An Introduction" and "The Old Playhouse", we see her boldness and frankness that make her open a new trial of the emancipation for the Indian woman. She is the first Indian women poet to crack the mold and introduce an idea with which the Indian people were quite unfamiliar. She tries her best to resist the male dominance and improve the female condition. She has presented these two poems in such a way that she has decorated a museum of the male perspective as well as social perspective and a trial to emancipate the women from the socially imposed restrictions. They are the noise of her urge to have freedom from the ancestral responsibilities. Thus, she urges Indian women to have their emotions and sensations for the sake of male –ego. This urge can also be interpreted as her extremist approach towards the patriarchy and this can be the subject of further study.

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